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ABSTRACT

This study, currently in progress, explores the perceptions of 75 near graduate primary teacher education students at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, about their preparedness to teach. It investigates the students' views about the areas of teaching for which they feel the 3-year program of teacher education at the School of Education, University of Waikato, has prepared them well and the areas in which they feel the program could have prepared them better. The study also identifies the things which students wish to know more about before they start with their first class of children, and the things they anticipate may cause them problems as a first-year teacher. The survey will be followed by interviews with 20 subjects concerning their perceptions of teaching after 6 months of teaching experience; 4 interviews are reported here. Initial survey data revealed that respondents felt the best prepared in setting up classroom reading-language programs, understanding the importance of planning, practical classroom teaching experience, and understanding the importance of assessment. They did not feel well prepared to manage children's behavior, to conduct long-term planning, and to teach mathematics. Interview data indicated that planning for a whole class across the range of curriculum subjects had been difficult, but that models provided by their tutor teachers had been helpful. Beginning teachers found it hard to articulate their planning process. Their planning is based on identified learning needs, New Zealand curriculum documents, constructivist views, research evidence, and transference of planning knowledge from one curriculum area to another. (JDD)

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Self-perceptions of Preparedness for Teaching of Teacher Education Graduates.

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Paper presented at the Australian Teacher Education Association Conference, 3-6 July 1994, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

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Self-perceptions of Preparedness for Teaching of Teacher Education Graduates.

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Abstract

This study, currently in progress, explores the perceptions of near graduate primary teacher education students about their preparedness to teach. It investigates the students' views about the areas of teaching for which they feel the three year programme of teacher education at the School of Education, University of Waikato has prepared them well and the areas in which they feel the programme could have prepared them better. The study also identifies the things which students wish to know more about before they start with their first class of children, and the things they anticipate may cause them problems as a first year teacher.

Twenty students (now beginning teachers) who obtained teaching positions for 1994 were interviewed after six months teaching experience to obtain their views about what they now find valuable from their teacher education programme. The teachers will be interviewed again in December 1994, at the end of their first year of teaching.

Introduction

Each teacher education institution in New Zealand, in an ongoing manner, reviews the content of its programmes for the purpose of modifying them in the light of innovation in curriculum and pedagogy and the needs of student teachers and schools, although little of the material resulting from such reviews is published widely. Monitoring of former student teachers' progress once they become beginning teachers has been less systematic.

The New Zealand literature on beginning teachers largely focuses on the experiences of beginning teachers in their first year or years of teaching (Battersby, 1980, 1984; Cameron & Grudnoff, 1993; Davenport 1971) or looks at progress

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through the pre-service teacher education programme (Calder, Faire & Schon, 1993; Oliver, 1992; Ramsay & Battersby, 1988; Renwick, 1984, 1993; Renwick and Vize, 1990, 1991, 1992). This study links the two. It focuses on the perceptions of beginning teachers themselves about their preparedness for their chosen profession, before they actually begin in the classroom and follows those same beginning teachers through their first year of teaching, checking out their perceptions after they have been teaching for six and then twelve months. The study will both inform the practice of the School of Education primary pre-service teacher education programme and provide some data on the kinds of inservice teacher education that may be needed during the initial two year induction period New Zealand primary teachers undergo in order to become registered as a teacher.

Research Methodology

Initial data was gathered, at the end of the 1993 academic year, from the Division A3 intake (students in the primary teacher education programme who had almost completed their three year teacher education programme*) in the School of Education as well as from a number of year four School of Education students who had completed the three year primary teacher education programme at the end of 1992 and were completing their Bachelor of Education degrees in 1993. Students filled out a written survey form. Students completing the survey identified whether they intended seeking a teaching position in 1994. From the initial seventy five respondents, twenty student teachers who became beginning teachers in 1994 were selected to be followed through their first year of teaching.

After six months teaching, the beginning teachers were interviewed in semi-structured interviews, exploring how the first six months of life as a teacher had been for them and in what ways their perceptions at the end of their training matched their teaching experience to this point. Issues that were identified by large numbers of survey respondents were checked out with interview participants to see if they had been issues for each individual.

* As well, some completing students had undertaken an alternative two year programme of teacher education or 'shortened course'. These students had either a full degree or three quarters of a degree before beginning their teacher education programme.

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Results and Discussion

Initial data from surveys

Self perceptions of the areas in which student teachers felt well prepared.

Over a third of the seventy five respondents felt well prepared for setting up a reading-language programme in their classrooms, especially in the junior primary school area (ages five to seven years). This high response rate perhaps reflects the emphasis placed on reading and language in the compulsory component of the primary teacher education programme. In each of the three years, this cohort of students have undertaken studies related to the teaching of reading-language. These students would have studied most other curriculum areas in only two of their three years in the programme.

Twenty of the seventy five respondents felt the School of Education had prepared them well in terms of understanding the importance of planning for teachers, however the corollary of this is that in answering the question "The ways in which I feel the School of Education could have prepared me better are..." nineteen respondents listed 'how to plan'. (See section below discussing perceptions of the ways in which students could have been better prepared for teaching.)

The provision of practical classroom teaching experience in the form of teaching practice or 'section' was listed by seventeen respondents as a way in which the School of Education had prepared them well for teaching. However a number of these students tempered their responses with comments that the value they got from teaching practice was very much dependent upon the quality of the associate teacher they worked alongside.

Having a well developed understanding of the importance of assessment, evaluation, monitoring and recording children's learning progress was remarked upon by fifteen respondents as a way in which they had been well prepared by the School of Education. Again it was the message about the importance of this rather than how to do it that was mentioned (see also below).

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The importance of having an awareness of equity issues, including bicultural issues and the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi for teachers and schools was listed by fourteen respondents. These matters are certainly a part of the academic plan of the School of Education, but there exist few ways of measuring the outcomes of such policies, let alone how they might be put into practice in the teaching and daily lives of our graduates. Some students also mentioned the Treaty and biculturalism as matters which they might find difficult to implement in their classrooms either because they felt their own knowledge was inadequate or they feared that some school communities might not welcome such classroom practices. *

The need to implement child centred programmes, that are based on recognition of children's individual learning needs, was a matter which the student teachers felt they had been made well aware of during their studies. Thirteen respondents identified this matter.

Thirteen respondents also stated that they felt their programme of teacher education had provided them with a good general curriculum knowledge. There were thirty two mentions of individual curriculum subjects as areas in which students felt well prepared, although a number of these were qualified with comments such as "but this was my area of specialisation - I don't feel as well prepared in the other areas".

Self perceptions of the areas in which student teachers felt they had not been well prepared.

Managing children's behaviour and dealing with difficult children was mentioned by twenty nine respondents as an area in which they did not feel well prepared for teaching. Some made qualifying comments such as "Maybe this can't be learned at university, not even on section" and "You can't be taught how to do it because you need to know the individual child first". However, there must be ways in which

* The Maori language is an official language of New Zealand and there is an official national Maori language syllabus, but this is not compulsory in schools, unlike the other syllabi and curriculum documents.

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the apprehensions of beginning teachers can be allayed to some degree, by providing strategies that give them some confidence in dealing with instances of children's inappropriate behaviour.

Planning was an issue for twenty five respondents, who felt ill-prepared for this aspect of the teacher's job. Many felt confident about planning individual, one-off lessons, but planning long term, in unit form and integrating planning across the whole curriculum was worrying these twenty five teachers. This is a very significant part of the teacher's job and ways of better preparing beginning teachers in this area need to be found. One idea that is being pursued in the 'six month' interviews with the beginning teachers is to record the narrative of exactly how teachers plan, as a means of providing models that might be helpful to student teachers during their pre-service teacher education programme. This is discussed further below.

The teaching of mathematics was an area in which students felt ill-prepared. Seventeen mentioned this curriculum subject. As well, there were fifty one mentions of individual curriculum areas as ones for which student teachers felt under-prepared. Again, some of these were qualified with comments such as "Didn't do this after the first year - would have liked to but had to make choices". As well there were sixteen comments about feelings of lack of preparation in curriculum generally.

Fifteen respondents felt teaching practice was too short and did not prepare them well for teaching. Here too, comments were made about the "risk of a poor associate teacher" being a problem.

Follow up interviews after six months teaching.

At the time of this conference only four of the twenty individual interviews have been conducted (the six month point for most New Zealand schools comes at the mid-term break, 4-10 July, and the original intention of this study, prior to knowledge of participation was to participate in the conference, was to interview participants during and immediately following this break).

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Beginning teachers and planning

During the four interviews completed so far, planning was an issue raised specifically with each participant, with the question "One of the things a number of

people identified at the end of last year, that they thought they could have been better prepared for, was planning - has this been an issue for you?" All four identified that planning for a whole class across all the range of curriculum subjects had been difficult, but that models provided by their tutor teachers * had been provided and been helpful. In three cases much of the planning was done jointly with the tutor teacher and/or with the beginning teacher's syndicate (group of teachers teaching similar class levels).

Interestingly, when probed further about the process of planning, with questions such as "Tell me about what you do when you plan" and "Think of a unit of work you have planned this year, what were the steps you took in planning it?", the beginning teachers found it hard to articulate exactly what is was they did. The key element of identifying children's learning needs first, and basing grouping of children for instruction and work, planning, and teaching using what had been identified was not mentioned. Decisions about what content to teach and how to teach it were largely based on what teaching resources the school had available and what might be "interesting to the children" from the teacher's perspective.

When asked "Is the way you plan your reading-language different from how you plan in the other curriculum areas?", the beginning teachers were able clearly to identify that they based grouping for instruction on clearly identified learning needs and planned accordingly, devising plans for each group, and recognising that groups would change over time as children progressed. Mathematics and to some degree science, were planned based on identified learning needs. This has been the case for mathematics teaching in most New Zealand primary school

* These are designated colleagues who are paired with individual beginning teachers and who work alongside them in a programme of induction and professional support, leading towards registration as a teacher. A time allowance has been negotiated as part of the Primary Teachers' Collective Employment Contract to facilitate this programme happening.

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classrooms for some time. The use of this approach in science, by some teachers, could be as a result of the new science curriculum document which clearly identifies levels of learning and states that in any one class there will be children on a number of different levels at any given time. In the main, the curriculum areas of social studies, Maori language (where it was actually taught), health, physical education, art and music were taught as a whole class group, with one set of planning for all the children.

Some questions

The question arises, is this difference in ways of planning due to beginning teachers' strong knowledge of curriculum content/what constitutes reading-language and lack of this knowledge in the other curriculum areas? Does it indicate a greater understanding of what constitutes science knowledge or social studies knowledge or art knowledge is necessary before teachers are able to identify children's learning needs and plan effectively to meet those needs? It would appear that teachers are beginning to plan and teach science by grouping children according to identified learning needs and I have suggested that this may be due to the way the new New Zealand science curriculum document is set out. Another possible influence on the beginning teachers in this study could be the strong constructivist emphasis in the science curriculum teaching at the School of Education. This constructivist emphasis aims to help student teachers to understand the importance of finding out children's views and knowledge of science topics, and to use these in planning their teaching. Another possible reason for the perceived strength in language-reading could be the amount of research evidence that exists about how children acquire language and how they learn to read. We understand, to a large degree, how these processes work for children, whereas in other curriculum areas, such as social studies, this body of research does not yet exist to the same degree.

A further question arises about how much transference from one curriculum area to another there is. That is, is knowledge of how to plan effectively for one curriculum area transferred to another by beginning teachers? Can they use their knowledge

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about how to plan in language-reading to help them plan their social studies? Year one teachers interviewed thus far when asked "Are there ways you could use the way you plan for language-reading when you plan for other areas like social studies or art?" admitted they had not thought of doing so.

These questions will be pursued during the next six months of the study.

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